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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Digest is to explore how heroes and heroines in children's literature from around the world help young learners understand and appreciate different cultures. It considers how protagonists can serve as role models for children; discusses how it is possible to obtain insights into universal and culturally specific values and beliefs through stories set in a range of settings; offers evaluation and selection criteria for international children's literature; and concludes with some resources for determining good international and multicultural children's literature. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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Exploring the Function of Heroes and Heroines in Children's Literature From Around the World

by Manjari Singh and Mei-Yu Lu

It is through literature that we most intimately enter the hearts and minds and spirits of other people. And what we value in this is the difference as well as the human similarities of others: that way, as C. S. Lewis put it, we become a thousand different people and yet remain ourselves.

—A. Chambers (as cited in Tomlinson, 1998, p.3)

Introduction

If anything has universal appeal among children, it is a good story with heroes and heroines. Stories with rich descriptions of the lives and personalities of inspiring individuals (mythical or real, contemporary or historical) entertain as well as serve as role models for children. Through heroes and heroines of different cultures, children develop an understanding of societal expectations and norms in various parts of the world (Stan, 2002; Tomlinson, 1998), and what it can mean to live in a particular region, or time period, or to be male or female (Rockman, 1993).

The purpose of this Digest is to explore how heroes and heroines in children's literature from around the world help young learners understand and appreciate different cultures. We consider how protagonists can serve as role models for children; discuss how it is possible to obtain insights into universal and culturally specific values and beliefs through stories set in a range of settings; and conclude with some resources for determining good international and multicultural children's literature.

Heroes and Heroines as Role Models

Heroes and heroines often stand out because they have distinctive strengths or personality traits. However, many stories may present an ordinary person leading an ordinary life, who in drawing upon "ordinary" character traits can stand out as being special. Heroes and heroines in good literature are portrayed as complex individuals, so it is necessary to analyze them in a holistic manner by paying special attention to the interplay of both positive and negative traits. Many main characters are strong role models because they rise above their own negative traits or weaknesses and overcome personal challenges. We often find protagonists inspiring because they demonstrate the need for individuals to be resilient and to respond proactively to challenging circumstances. Discussing heroes and heroines with children presents countless opportunities for considering how character traits are expressed in others, and how children can develop positive character traits in themselves.

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Heroes and Heroines as Exemplars of Universal Character Traits

A content analysis of award winning children's books from around the world indicates some character traits are universally appreciated. These include: personal courage, caring for others, perseverance, resourcefulness, a belief in oneself, and optimism (Singh, Lin, & Lu, 2002). Through books children can see heroes and heroines in different regions respond to issues such as racial, ethnic, and religious strife in ways that demonstrate courage and resilience. While different societies may value similar character traits, how these traits are expressed can vary in different regions. Descriptions indicating cultural variations in how character traits are manifest, help children gain a sensitive understanding of how universal traits can also be unique. By using heroes and heroines to explore the differential impact societal issues have on people around the world we can delve into examining issues surrounding expressions of individuality, identification with social groups, and strategies for dealing with various forms of discrimination.

Heroes and Heroines as Exemplars of Characters Traits Appreciated in Particular Contexts and Time Periods

Heroes and heroines are best understood and appreciated when viewed within the social contexts in which their lives played out. Just as every cultural and ethnic group has its own distinctive system of values and beliefs, which reflect unique ways of thinking, behaving, and living, so, too, character traits considered desirable are a unique reflection of a group's value and belief system (Hourihan, 1997). Accordingly, it is important to foster non-judgmental discussions among students about how some cultures may view certain character traits to be positive while others may consider these traits in a negative light.

Actively considering the dynamic nature of social, economic, and political contexts contributes to a thoughtful analysis of the thoughts, emotions, and actions of individual heroes and heroines. We must be careful when making connections between valued character traits in societies in the present and those from different historical periods. At the same time, ever changing present day realities also require us to be cautious in understanding contemporary heroes and their societies. Certain character traits we viewed positively just a few years ago may now be offensive within our societies. Certain realities heroes and heroines took for granted just a short time span ago may now be those that are the sources of conflict. On the whole, we must take care to analyze each hero or heroine's character traits and actions first within the context in which they have been

presented, and only then attempt to make meaning of these character traits in a manner that transcends contextual boundaries.

As access to other cultures around the world becomes increasingly easy, it is more important than ever for educators and parents to recognize how children can be provided opportunities to understand how people in diverse areas live, feel, and think (Marston, 1997). The following section is devoted to criteria useful for selecting and evaluating international children's literature. We have also included some citations that contain bibliographies of exemplary international and multicultural books.

Evaluating and Selecting Criteria for International Children's Literature

There are universal criteria for evaluating and selecting high quality children's literature whether this is for young or older readers, for boys or girls. However, additional considerations need to be taken into account while introducing books from other countries to children. The following list was developed by synthesizing recommendations from several sources (ALSC Board, 1987; Council of Interracial Books for Children, 1974; Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Barba, 1992; Tomlinson, 2002):

1. **Authenticity**: While most books are created by authors writing within their own country and in their local language, some books are written by non-native authors. Authors from both groups provide readers with different views—as insiders and outsiders—about a specific culture. The jacket flap and the back of a book are often good places for readers to identify the author's origin, as well as the resources and research he/she used to create the story. This information can be crucial when the author is not from the society in which the story takes place.
2. **Context**: Context is important in understanding meaning. When introducing children's literature from other countries, some terms and concepts may be unfamiliar to the readers. Wherever possible, readers should be provided with information regarding foreign vocabulary or concepts. This can be integrated into the story, shared as footnotes, or provided in a glossary.
3. **Perspectives**: Stories and illustrations for children are never neutral, but reflect the world view held by the author/artist. It is therefore critical to check for perspectives toward particular socio-economic and cultural groups both in written text and illustrations.
4. **Translation**: Translation is the art of recreating a story by remaining true to the tone, style, plot, characterization, and emotion that the original author expressed. Whenever possible, ask people from the particular language group to check the accuracy of concepts, language, and meaning, or even better, to compare the original and translated text.
5. **Illustration**: High quality illustrations in a picture book not only complement the written text but also provide an alternative way for readers, especially the very young, to interpret the story. Although artist styles and media of presentation may vary, it is important that these styles are true to the characters and the context they depict. While examining illustrations, look at how characters are portrayed (i.e., whether all of them look alike or dress alike). If language symbols such as signboards in a street scene are used, are these orthographically correct?

Resources for International Children's Literature

There are several resources devoted to introducing children's books from around the world, providing annotated bibliographies of these books, and discussing trends and issues in international children's literature. We used three books while writing this digest—*The New Press Guide to Multicultural Resources for Young Readers* (Muse, 1997), *The World Through Children's Books* (Stan, 2002), and *Children's Books from Other Countries* (Tomlinson, 1998). For more information, readers may also wish to consult the following two books: *Global Perspectives in Children's Literature, edited by* Freeman and Lehman in 2001 (ISBN 0205308627) and *Change and Renewal in Children's Literature*, by Van Der Walt and Fairer-Wessels, published in 2004 (ISBN 0275981851). In addition, *Bookbird, A Journal of International Children's Literature* (ISSN 0067377) by International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) also offers valuable information on many facets of international children's literature. Finally, a web link created by the Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication containing resources on organizations, reviews sources, booklists, and issues and trends in international children's literature is located at: http://reading.indiana.edu/ieo/bibs/intlchlit.html.

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